

## GREEK MYTHS

### Conception

Throughout history, the religion of each social and cultural group included an explanation of how the world was created, how people came into being, and just what their relationship to the creator was. In the Norse myth, the world was created from the body of god; the Iroquois Indians believed that the earth was created through the labor of several animals. In Norse mythology, men and women originated from trees and were brought to life by the gods; the Chinook Indians believed people were created by a coyote who then taught them the art of farming.

In return for this gift of life, the human race owed respect to its creating spirits or gods, and each society developed rituals of worship in order to ensure the creator's continued goodwill. The influence of these gods was great: everyday existence and the laws of society were governed by them. By praying and offering appropriate gifts, humans believed that good fortune would follow. Conversely, if misfortune struck, it was a sign that humans had insulted the gods or were in some way out of favor with them.

Because the creation myth has existed in every culture, we must conclude that it springs from a basic need. Just as a child needs answers to satisfy his unquenchable curiosity, early people needed something beyond themselves to explain a confusing universe and their presence in it.

The need of each society to produce a creation myth is obvious; the question that now concerns us is why the actual accounts are so very different. For instance, there is quite a difference between the Norse myth about gods and their relationship to humankind and the Greek myths on the same subject. It seems to be clear that the kinds of accounts that any particular society created are a reflection of that society's way of life. The kinds of stories told will give us tremendous insight into the people who created them. Since our study in this section is of Greek mythology, we are going to discover a great deal about how the Greek mind worked and also about life in ancient Greece.

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### The Creation of the World

In the beginning there was Chaos. Everything was in confusion and darkness. Out of Chaos, there appeared Night and Depth (Erebus).

From the union of these two elements came Eros, which was Love and the most significant figure to appear thus far. Many words came from this name. Erotic is one and it refers to sexual love in our modern sense. But the Greeks did not see Eros in such a single-minded way. To them, Eros represented a principle of order. They believed that it was Eros that was capable of bringing an ordered universe out of Chaos. In its role as a principle of order, Eros performed the first marriage by bringing together Uranus, the sky, and Gaia, the earth.

Gaia and Uranus had many different types of offspring. When discussing a marriage of such grand dimensions as that between the earth and the sky, we must accept the extraordinary. Gaia gave birth to monsters called the Hundred-handed Children. She also produced huge one-eyed giants called Cyclops. Perhaps her most famous offspring were the twelve Titans, who were huge giants, and in whose image human beings were later created. Uranus did not prove to be an ideal father. He was jealous and afraid of his children. He feared that his children might try to usurp his power and attempted to solve this problem by burying them alive in the earth. Naturally, Gaia was very unhappy with this and plotted with Cronus, the youngest of the Titans, to overthrow Uranus. Cronus, with his mother's help, seriously wounded Uranus with a long, curved knife, and became supreme ruler.

Once in power, Cronus began to worry that he, too, might be overthrown as he had overthrown his father. Therefore, as a safety measure, he released only the Titans from the earth, leaving the Hundred-handed Children and the Cyclops buried. He married one of his sisters, Rhea, and together they had twelve children. But mindful of what he had done to his father, he determined that none of his children would ever usurp his power. He therefore ate each child as it was born. Rhea determined to save one child.

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When her last son, Zeus, was born, she gave Cronus a stone wrapped up in a cloth and sent Zeus in secret to Mount Ida in Crete where he was raised in a sacred cave. When Zeus became a young man, he went to his father's court disguised as a page and fed him an emetic. This caused Cronus to regurgitate all of his eleven children—fully grown. Naturally, the children were only too willing to aid Zeus against their father, and a war developed.

Zeus and his forces established their headquarters on a high mountain called Mount Olympus. His main allies were his brothers, Poseidon and Hades, and two Titans, Prometheus and Epimetheus. Zeus also released the Cyclops on condition that they would aid him. After ten hard years of fighting, when it seemed first one side would win and then the other, Zeus was finally victorious.

Zeus divided the world among himself and his two brothers. Zeus became god of the sky and the upper world; Poseidon became god of the sea and Hades became god of the underworld. Other brothers and sisters received favors as well. Although Zeus was generous to his allies, he was merciless toward his enemies. Atlas, a Titan who had fought for his brother Cronus, was forced to hold up the world for all eternity. Atlas was not the last person that discovered that going against the will of Zeus would result in horrible punishment.

Now that you are familiar with the Greek creation myth, consider some of its implications....

We have seen that the Hundred-handed Children and the Cyclops were buried alive in the earth. On first reading, the monstrous form of these offspring and their fate may seem childish and laughable. But consider: this account is one of the earliest of the Greek stories and is an attempt to explain the earth. What sorts of natural occurrences do you think the movement or anger of these children could explain?

There is an interesting footnote to the story of Cronus. We have a modern English word that comes directly from his name... chronology, the science of computing time. In Greek, *chronos* means time. Therefore, it would seem that Cronus is Time or that he brought into the world the idea of Time as opposed to infinity. It is interesting to note that our figure of Father Time, as he is depicted at the end of every year, carries a sickle (curved knife). Many people are aware of this figure, but very few realized that the idea originated from the Greek creation myth.

Since these myths were made up by a society that had only its own experience to draw on, the resulting stories reveal something about that society. By examining the way Cronus, and later Zeus, took power, what conclusions can you draw about life in the ruling classes of Greece at that time?

We must also deal with the problem of whether the Greeks actually saw these gods as enlarged humans or as abstract ideas. If one looks at the myth closely, it becomes obvious that the gods became more “human” as the story progressed. It was easier to see Zeus as a human-like figure than Gaea, even though Gaea was often given human motives. Perhaps we must accept the fact that it is just natural for a human when discussing the earth and sky... clearly non-human forms... to humanize them. After all, human reason is the means by which we comprehend.

This humanization is also seen in the effort to put the story of creation into the form of marriages. Marriage was something that the Greeks could understand. It seems that originally the idea behind the story was more important than the effort to visualize the story in human terms; an example is the domestic life of Gaea and Uranus. But by the time the myth of Zeus was recorded, the Greeks wanted more human-looking gods. They were larger than life, but they had enough human qualities to which people could relate. It is well to remember that the gods could take on other shapes if they wished. There are many stories of such changes, but because human beings created the stories, they imagined the gods mainly as super-humans.

Although Greek mythology may be new to you, the words which you have been using in everyday conversation relate directly to Greek myths. For instance, when you view a scene of utter confusion and state that you cannot stand all of the chaos, you are really making reference to the Greek concept of the universe before the gods were created. If the people who named the ocean liners had thought about the story of the unfortunate Titans, they would not have named a ship the “Titanic”.

## **Greek Origins Myth – Packet**

Read through “Conception” and “Creation”. As you read you should underline important concepts, definitions, or questions. Also, circle the words that are new to you or that you don’t fully understand. In these sections, questions are asked that you should think about as you read. After reading the sections, answer the questions on this worksheet. Afterward, you will be grouped to discuss your answers.

Using your knowledge of the creation myth, account for the meaning of the following:

Geography

Geology

Erotic

Atlas

Olympic

Why do societies need to produce a creation myth?

What does the creation myth of the Greeks tell you about their society? What might they base their life upon if they believe the myth of Zeus and Cronos?

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What “role” does order play in this creation myth? How was order created in the myth? How might order be created in the everyday life of Greeks if they took this myth as an example?

What sorts of natural occurrences do you think the movement or anger of the buried children could explain?

By examining the way in which Cronos, and later Zeus, took power, what conclusions can you draw about life in the ruling classes of Greece at that time?

Why would the Greeks want the figures in the myths to have human qualities or to appear human-looking?

What is the purpose of myths?